
By SARA ARBER

Department of Sociology, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK

S.Arber@surrey.ac.uk

Sleep and politics may sound like a contradiction in terms, but Simon Williams’ book persuades us that sleep is deeply political both on the individual (personal) level and at the societal and corporate levels. This carefully crafted book is beautifully written, providing an elegant and convincing argument of relevance for sociologists of health and illness, as well as sociologists of the body and those interested in broader structural issues associated with global capitalism.

Williams argues that sleep doubles not only as a ‘problem’ for individuals and for society but also serves as a ‘prism’ through which sociologists can gain a greater understanding of diverse aspects of life in the late modern age. In essence, how ‘sleep problems or concerns regarding sleep are not simply a *product* of society, but a *prism* or point of articulation and *amplification* for a range of other fears, worries, frustrations and anxieties regarding contemporary life and living’ (authors’ emphasis, p xii).
The crux of Williams’ argument is to examine in detail the dominant ‘sleep-negative’ agenda and juxtapose this with the growing ‘sleep-positive’ agenda. The ‘sleep-negative’ agenda can be gauged through examining a wide range of ‘sleep-neglecting’ and ‘sleep-negating’ discourses and practices. Sleep tends to be devalued within society, which privileges the conscious rational waking dimensions of life, especially paid work and leisure activities. Williams documents the ways that the contemporary work ethic and long hours work culture, the 24/7 society, globalisation, and the ‘wired’ (always awake) world dominate over any concerns about an individual’s sleep. This dominance can be seen through emblematic expressions such as ‘Sleep is for wimps’ and examples of significant figures (such as Mrs Thatcher) for whom lack of sleep is a ‘badge of honour’. A pervasive prioritisation of values such as self-mastery and control, predominates over corporeal matters such as sleep. These dominant discourses and practices, are reinforced in contemporary society by sleep being a largely private and invisible matter, generally considered of little significance. Yet, sleep can be seen as an important and powerful reminder of the limits of rational modernity and control.

Counterposed to the ‘sleep-negative’ agenda, Williams examines how a concerned ‘sleep-positive’ agenda has developed from societal and corporate concerns that lack of sleep is problematic, particularly leading to accidents, loss of productivity and performance. He draws on diverse research and other sources to examine the growing proliferation of discourses about sleep-friendly policies and practices within society, self-help sleep advice, and the growth of
sleep medicine, sleep clinics, sleep experts, and the ‘sleep industry’ that sells products to promise a ‘good night’s sleep’. Societal concerns can be seen through motorway signs that ‘tiredness kills’ and prosecution of sleepy drivers. Thus, Williams counterposes the tensions and attempted resolutions between the sleep-negative and sleep-positive agendas and how these tensions are played at the individual, corporate and societal levels.

A further kernel of Williams’ argument is the independent critical-reflexive role of the social sciences within these debates. He shows how social scientists through discussing or researching sleep, and sharing common assumptions with sleep scientists, may be accomplices in the increasing politisation of sleep within both the ‘sleep-negative’ and ‘sleep-positive’ agendas. Thus, social scientists may be implicated in a dynamic way with the increasing politicisation of sleep in contemporary society.

Although, Williams admits to ‘theoretical eclecticism’ (p xxi), underlying his book is a focus on sleepy/alert bodies that draws heavily on the ideas of Foucault, the production of ‘at risk’ selves and the self-regulated body. He sees sleep fundamentally as ‘located at the intersection of material-corporeal questions concerning the regulation and governance of bodies’ (p 158). His work integrates the microlevel of individual bodies with the macrolevel of the body politic, particularly the corporeal needs of the body politic in late capitalism. Thus, the book examines the biomedicalization of sleep and the biopolitics of sleep, seeing sleep as a vital commodity to be converted into other forms of capital.
The Politics of Sleep provides novel insights about a hitherto largely invisible aspect of everyday life. It will make readers ‘wake up’ to issues that are fundamental to their own lives and to stimulate researchers to consider anew the reach of experts, corporations and society in shaping and moulding our dormant and waking lives.